How to Be a Know-It-All

What you learn from the Very Short Introduction series.

By Kathryn Schulz October 9, 2017

A yearning for mastery, or the illusion of it, has helped make a nerdy series from a nerdy publishing house impressively popular. ***Illustration by Tamara Shopsin and Jason Fulford***

In addition to all of your other identities—urban, rural, Christian, atheist, African-American, first-generation, introverted, immunocompromised, cyclist, gun owner, gardener, middle child, whatever panoply of nouns and adjectives and allegiances describes you—you are also this: a gnathostome. A gnathostome is a creature with a jaw, a characteristic you share with all other human beings, plus macaques, zebras, great white sharks, minks, skinks, boa constrictors, and some sixty thousand other species.

I learned this fact about myself (and you) from one of the more unlikely books I lately committed to reading: "Teeth: A Very Short Introduction," by Peter S. Ungar, a professor of anthropology at the University of Arkansas. Like its subject, "Teeth" is both a freestanding entity and part of a larger body: the Very Short Introduction series, a project of Oxford University Press. At present, that series consists of five hundred and twenty-six books; "Teeth" clocks in at No. 384. If you are so inclined, you can also read a Very Short Introduction to, among a great many other things, Rivers, Mountains, Metaphysics, the Mongols, Chaos, Cryptography, Forensic Psychology, Hinduism, Autism, Puritanism, Fascism, Free Will, Drugs, Nutrition, Crime Fiction, Madness, Malthus, Medical Ethics, Hieroglyphics, the Russian Revolution, the Reagan Revolution, Dinosaurs, Druids, Plague, Populism, and the Devil.

Some of these books are concise introductions to topics you might later wish to pursue in greater depth: Modern India, say, or Shakespeare's Tragedies. Others, like "Teeth," contain pretty much everything the average layperson would ever want or need to know. All of them, however, take their Very Short commitment seriously. The length of each book is fixed at thirty-five thousand words, or roughly a hundred and twenty pages. (See Very Short Introduction No. 500, "Measurement.") Never mind that the Roman Empire got some four thousand pages from Edward Gibbon, and that was just to chronicle its demise; here it gets the same space as Circadian Rhythms, Folk Music, and Fungi.

In a clever marketing move, the Very Short Introductions advertise their brevity visually. They are small and trim, as if Steve Jobs had designed them, with covers that feature five hundred and twenty-six variations on the theme of horizontal swaths of color, like knockoff Rothkos or the wrappers on high-end chocolate bars. In common with the latter, they make for an appealing purchase, impulse or otherwise. Looking at them, it strikes you that, if you had to hop a flight from D.C. to Cleveland, you could be well on your way to mastering the basics of Microeconomics or Medieval Britain by the time you arrived.

That feeling, or something like it—the yearning for mastery, or, more cynically, the yearning for the illusion of mastery—has helped make a basically nerdy series from a basically nerdy publishing house impressively popular. Since the Very Short Introductions were launched, in 1995, they have collectively sold eight million copies and been translated into forty-nine languages. Somewhat surprisingly, the books that sell best are those which tackle the most demanding topics: the U.S. Supreme Court outperforms Hollywood, and Aristotle outperforms Dinosaurs. True to that logic, for some years in a row the best-selling book in the series has been

"Globalization." The No. 2 spot currently belongs to "Literary Theory," a title that I would have guessed languished near the bottom, somewhere in the vicinity of, say, "Environmental Economics" and "Engels."

As the Oxford project has grown in popularity, it has also increased considerably in size. There is no Very Short Introduction to the Universe—although you can read about Earth, Planets, Stars, Galaxies, and Infinity—but there will almost certainly be one eventually, because, like the universe itself, the series is still expanding. Roughly fifty new titles are published every year; all told, the in-house list of topics to be covered currently runs to one thousand two hundred and fifteen. Nor will matters end there. In fact, matters will not end anywhere. According to Nancy Toff, the American editor of the series, its intended scope is basically limitless.

In that sense, the Very Short Introductions have a very long history. Ever since people began writing things down, we have intermittently attempted to write *everything* down: the nature of the earth and the cosmos, all of prehistory and recorded time, and the political arrangements, cultural productions, and collective wisdom of humankind. For at least the past few centuries, pundits have routinely popped up to lament the ostensible death of that dream, invariably at the hands of increased specialization and an explosion in the available information. That lament was always absurd, not because the dream didn't die but because it never lived. There has never been a golden era in which our collective knowledge was so modest that it could be compiled in one place—and, if such an era had existed, one wonders exactly how golden it would have been.

In our own time, though, a curious thing has happened. Thanks to technological advances, our ability to store information has just

about caught up to our ability to produce it, putting the dream of an omnibus compilation of knowledge in reach for the first time in history. Arguably, Wikipedia is such a compilation; arguably, so is the Internet itself. At all events, the world's knowledge is better documented and more accessible today than it has ever been; you probably carry it with you in your pocket everywhere you go. In that context, the Very Short Introduction series is something like a top-of-the-line Canon camera: it's wonderful, but most people will still just use their phone.

That makes the popularity of this series all the more remarkable, especially right now, when truth is hotly contested and expertise is anathema. Yet, in a way, this popularity makes perfect sense. Although no one would describe "Isotopes: A Very Short Introduction" as pleasure reading, it's a profound relief, these days, to press our collective feverish forehead against the cold steel of actual information. What better time than one in which nothing makes any sense to revive the ancient dream of knowing everything?

It could reasonably be said of Pliny the Elder that he was killed, like a cat, by curiosity. In August of 79 A.D., while commanding a fleet in the Bay of Naples, the Roman statesman and author witnessed a volcano erupting nearby and went ashore to get a closer look. Bad move: he landed barely two miles from Pompeii, the eruption was that of Vesuvius, and within forty-eight hours the poisonous gases it spewed into the atmosphere had killed him.

Pliny knew quite a lot about volcanoes—according to him, the ashes from Mt. Etna fell on towns as far as thirty-five miles away, while the hottest lava in the world flowed from a summit in Ethiopia—because he knew quite a lot about everything. At the time of his death, he had been completing the final revisions on his ten-volume "Natural

History," whose subject he defined as, in a word, "life." To that immodest objective, he added an equally immodest claim. "There is not one person to be found among us who has made the same venture," he wrote in his preface, "nor yet one among the Greeks who has tackled single-handed all departments of the subject."

About that much, at least, Pliny was probably right: "Natural History" is one of the earliest-known efforts to record all available human knowledge in a single work. It begins with the appropriately expansive question of whether the universe is finite or infinite, then goes on to address, among other subjects, planets, eclipses, elements, the distance between stars, the antipodes ("Do they exist?"), geography, botany, agriculture, horticulture, mineralogy, mining, medicine, the uses of papyrus, counterfeit coins, the character of various Roman eminences, and famed artists and writers past as well as contemporaneous. (See also Very Short Introduction No. 1, "Classics.")

The resulting work is endlessly fascinating and extremely fun to read, but its merits come skidding to a stop at the question of accuracy: by any standards, not just modern ones, vast swaths of "Natural History" are utter bunk. Peter Ungar would be dismayed by Pliny's "investigation as to teeth," which includes the assertions—odd in part because they are so easily disproved—that men have more teeth than women, and that "human teeth contain a kind of poison, for they dim the brightness of a mirror when bared in front of it and also kill the fledglings of pigeons." Yet those and countless other blatant falsehoods did nothing to undermine the book's popularity; if the best-seller list weren't such a recent phenomenon (see Very Short Introduction No. 170, "Bestsellers"), "Natural History" would have dominated it for some sixteen centuries. As late as 1646, the British philosopher Sir Thomas Browne could still complain, "There is scarce a popular error passant in our days,

which is not either directly expressed or deductively contained in this work; which, being in the hands of most men, hath proved a powerful occasion of their propagation."

Browne wrote those words in his own omnibus project, "Enquiries Into Very Many Received Tenets, and Commonly Presumed Truths," generally known as "Vulgar Errors"—a kind of inverted encyclopedia, which sought to establish the world's truths by chronicling its falsehoods. What Browne failed to mention was that he was insulting his intellectual progenitor; with "Natural History," Pliny had essentially invented the genre of the encyclopedia. (Pliny did not use the term, but Browne did. It comes from a misreading of the Greek phrase *enkyklios paideia*—literally, "circular education." The circle in question is not that of circular reasoning but, rather, the kind we have in mind when we talk about a "well-rounded education.") For the next thousand years, nearly every attempt at an encyclopedic work, at least in the Western world, was written by someone who had read Pliny and found him to be either inspiring or wanting.

But more potent forces motivated these subsequent authors as well. Across cultures and eras, the two greatest powers behind the production and dissemination of knowledge—which is to say, its control—have been religious authorities and the state, and one or the other typically provided both the financial means and the ideological ends for compendium projects. Thus, scholars working under the auspices of Islam produced encyclopedias (of medicine, of science, of everything) as early as the eighth century, while in China the Song dynasty oversaw the creation of "The Four Great Books of Song," an omnibus work a hundred years in the making, and the Ming dynasty produced the eleven thousand and ninety-five volumes of the Yongle Encyclopedia—until the digital age, the largest encyclopedia in the world.

In the premodern West, where civil authorities showed little interest in—and sometimes considerable antagonism toward—the broad dissemination of knowledge, most encyclopedists were monastic Christians. Unlike Pliny, who wrote for the benefit of his own reputation, plus possibly some praise from the emperor, these later authors bent to their impossible task with the aim of glorifying God. For them, the natural world was a divine gift, analogous to the Bible; they studied creation in order to draw closer to the Creator. The most influential of these devout compilers include the seventh-century scholar Isidore of Seville, whose "Etymologies" was the principal textbook of the early Middle Ages (the title is misleading; of its twenty volumes, just one is dedicated to the origins of words), and Vincent of Beauvais, a thirteenth-century Dominican friar responsible for "The Great Mirror," an eighty-book compilation that attempted to summarize all practical and scholarly knowledge accrued up to that time, along with all history, beginning, like Genesis, with God and the creation of the world.

These works had something in common with narrower compendia produced under religious auspices, from medieval bestiaries to lives of the saints to Christian systematics themselves—attempts to organize all the themes, topics, and texts of Christianity into a single coherent work. But they also had something in common with a far older idea, dating back at least to Plato: the great chain of being, a grand interconnected hierarchy within which every part of the natural world has its allotted position. As interpreted by early monastics, the great chain of being began with God, below which came angels and other creatures of the spirit, followed by humans, followed by other animals, plants, and, at the base, rocks and minerals. Centuries of Christian scholars tinkered with this basic structure—adding royalty below God and above the rest of us, for instance, or subdividing angels so that seraphim trumped cherubim

—until every imaginable entity had a place of its own.

It was this hierarchy—so central to Western cosmology for so long that, even today, a ten-year-old could intuitively get much of it right—that was challenged by the most famous compendium of all: Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's eighteen-thousand-page Encyclopédie. Published between 1751 and 1772, the Encyclopédie was sponsored by neither the Catholic Church nor the French monarchy and was covertly hostile to both. It was intended to secularize as well as to popularize knowledge, and it demonstrated those Enlightenment commitments most radically through its organizational scheme. Rather than being structured, as it were, God-down, with the whole world flowing forth from a divine creator, it was structured human-out, with the world divided according to the different ways in which the mind engages with it: "memory," "reason," and "imagination," or what we might today call history, science and philosophy, and the arts. Like alphabetical order, which effectively democratizes topics by abolishing distinctions based on power and precedent in favor of subjecting them all to the same rule, this new structure had the effect of humbling even the most exalted subjects. In producing the Encyclopédie, Diderot did not look up to the heavens but out toward the future; his goal, he wrote, was "that our descendants, by becoming more learned, may become more virtuous and happier."

It is to Diderot's Encyclopédie that we owe every modern one, from the Britannica and the World Book to Encarta and Wikipedia. But we also owe to it many other kinds of projects designed to, in his words, "assemble all the knowledge scattered on the surface of the earth." It introduced not only new ways to do so but new reasons—chief among them, the diffusion of information prized by an élite class into the culture at large. The Encyclopédie was both the cause and the effect of a profoundly Enlightenment conviction: that, for books

about everything, the best possible audience was the Everyman.

It is not entirely clear where you would situate the Very Short Introductions if you were designing a great chain of reading. They are something like textbooks—in that they provide a basic education on a single subject, are popular among and useful to students, and are largely written by professors—but also something like conventional nonfiction, in that they are meant to be read on their own, without lectures or problem sets. They are also something like the entries in an encyclopedia, since what they promise, above all else, is brevity and edification; for the same reason, they are something like CliffsNotes, which likewise offer a shortcut to knowledge. Finally, they are something like the For Dummies series, with the chief difference between the two being a caricature of the difference between Oxford and Indianapolis, where the Dummies guides are published: the British books tackle abstract subjects in cerebral tones, while the American books focus on pragmatic topics ("Knitting for Dummies," "HTML for Dummies," "Diabetes for Dummies") through lists, illustrations, and simple prose. Still, the two series share one basic and hopeful vision of humanity: that what someone can teach, anyone can learn.

That is, of course, the dream of Diderot, filtered down across eras and borders. In twentieth-century France, it took the shape of the Que Sais-Je? series, a near-exact analogue to the Very Short Introductions (the phrase, which means "What do I know?," is what Montaigne had engraved on his personal seal), while in Germany it helped forge a similar project called, simply, Wissen: "Knowledge." In England, the idea of a series of books designed to educate the public at large about the world at large was first taken up by Allen Lane. Lane was the founder and editor-in-chief of Penguin Books, a British publishing house that originally specialized in fiction, and its later imprint, Pelican, which published

nonfiction that was borderline academic but aimed at a general audience: “Common Wildflowers,” “Practical Economics,” “Glass Through the Ages,” “Electronic Computers.” Many of these were written by literary eminences, including the very first book that Pelican published, “The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism,” by George Bernard Shaw. By the time the imprint was discontinued, in 1984, it had published thousands of books that had collectively served as, in the company’s words, “an informal university for generations of Britons.” (The Pelican imprint was revived in 2014, with a modest catalogue of five books.)

By demonstrating that scholarly nonfiction could turn a profit, Pelican Books exerted an outsized influence on the publishing industry. Among its many direct and indirect descendants was Oxford University Press’s Past Masters series, which launched in 1980 and served up concise biographies of historical figures, from Bentham and Carlisle to Spinoza and Tolstoy. In 1995, that series ceased publication, and its extant titles were folded into a new O.U.P. project: the Very Short Introductions.

It’s impossible to generalize about the resulting books, partly because they are written by five-hundred-odd different authors and partly because not even the series editor has read all of them. (They aren’t *that* short.) I read a dozen or so cover to cover and started, skimmed, or skipped around in two dozen more—a practice that, in this case, feels less like reading on the cheap and more like browsing in a bookstore or shopping classes at the beginning of a college term. A few of the introductions I sampled were disappointing. “Mountains” reads in places like a United Nations report, while “Home” succumbs to didacticism, an easy pitfall for this kind of book, and “Archeology,” in its effort to avoid stuffiness, veers too far in the direction of bad jokes and bad taste.

But those are exceptions. For the most part, the Very Short Introductions range from worth reading to wonderfully appealing. It helps that some volumes are the product of exceptional writers and thinkers; it's a pleasure to read Hermione Lee on "Biography" (if not quite *as* pleasurable as reading her biography of Virginia Woolf), or Terry Eagleton on "The Meaning of Life," one of the grander titles in the collection, here rendered wry. Plenty of less familiar names make welcome contributions, too. Darren Oldridge is excellent on the Devil (whether he serves God's will or defies it, for instance, and how he has migrated inward in modern times, leaving off torturing the body in favor of distorting the mind); and Paul Strohm is astute on the equally enticing subject of "Conscience" (how inconvenient it is, how unevenly distributed, how strangely yet strategically it is located, simultaneously in the deepest reaches of the self and on the boundary we share with the world).

The most impressive introductions, though, are the ones that shine despite their lacklustre subjects. Teeth, for example, is a topic I don't care about at all, beyond no root canals, please, yet the book is among the best introductions I read. Ungar is epigrammatic ("The goal is to break without being broken"), understatedly funny ("Getting food from the biosphere into the mouth can be a challenge"), and succinct about why such an unprepossessing topic should command our attention. "Teeth matter because they are right in the middle of it," he writes, "mediating between eater and eaten." He proves it, too; in reading "Teeth," you learn a considerable amount about evolution, biodiversity, biology, ecology, paleontology, and even physics.

Similarly, Nick Middleton's introduction to "Deserts"—a definitionally dry subject—is fantastically interesting. It covers everything from the historical importance of desert cities (Baghdad, Cairo) to the adaptive weirdness of desert creatures (camels,

locusts) and the highly variable composition of deserts themselves, which, as we learn, take up twenty-five per cent of the earth's surface—if not more, since, as Middleton points out, natural features do not have hard-and-fast boundaries. In fact, like many subjects in the series, his turns out to be surprisingly difficult to define. Mere lack of rainfall does not a desert make, since the real issue is not so much the absolute quantity of precipitation in an area (in the form of rain, fog, snow, or dew) as the ratio of that precipitation to the rate of evaporation. In south-central Egypt, for example, the annual rainfall averages between zero and five millimetres, but the annual evaporation rate can be as high as five *metres*. Middleton's colloquial definition sums it up: "If you leave a bucket on the ground and it never fills up, you are in a desert." Sometimes, however, there is no ground to leave a bucket on. As Middleton explains, there are deserts in the middle of the ocean: marine regions that have an arid climate because so little freshwater falls into them. Desert islands, it turns out, are surrounded by desert oceans.

As that suggests, much of the pleasure to be found in the Very Short Introductions is the bedrock one of good nonfiction: facts. It is fascinating to learn, from "Robotics," that rats use more of their cerebral cortex to process input from their whiskers than from their eyes. Or, from "Bestsellers," that the first novel to be optioned for the movies was Thomas Dixon's "The Clansman," which became D. W. Griffith's 1915 film, "The Birth of a Nation." Or, from "Galaxies," that if we lived nearer to the center of the Milky Way, in a region called Sagittarius A* (the asterisk is part of its name, like the dollar sign in Ke$ha), we would see, packed into the same distance that stretches out empty between us and Alpha Centauri, more than twenty million stars.

If you read enough of the Very Short Introductions in a row, some of

these facts, gleaned from different books, collide with one another and do interesting things—coalesce, contradict, form big, thudding major chords or eerie minor ones. But these encounters happen only in your mind; the series is not designed to put its subjects into any particular relationship. On the contrary: unlike Pliny and the Christian encyclopedists and, in his way, Diderot, the Very Short Introductions abandon taxonomy entirely. There is no hierarchy in them, no genealogy or chronology or organizing principle of any other kind. Instead, as with many modern omnibus projects, the books' essential structure is that of the inventory, and their essential grammar that of conjunction: not *this above that* or *this below that* or *this because of that* but *this and that and that and that*. (This is one reason, apart from the fun of it, that there are so many lists in this piece.)

Initially, what dazzles about the Very Short Introductions collection is its apparent diversity—World Music! The Tudors! Animal Rights!—but an inventory of its inventory reveals a lot of gaps. Some of these are likely to be remedied by the arrival of future volumes, since they are merely the consequence of carving up the world wherever the knife happens to fall. At present, you can read about Mountains and Deserts but not about Ecology, about the American West but not the American South, about Shakespeare's Comedies and Shakespeare's Tragedies and Shakespeare's Sonnets but not about Shakespeare's Histories.

Other omissions, however, appear to be deliberate—for example, the somewhat comic failure of the series to cover athletics. There's a Very Short Introduction to Sport, much as there's a Very Short Introduction to Philosophy, but while you can also read books in the series on Epicureanism, Existentialism, Metaphysics, and Hermeneutics, to say nothing of some sixty other philosophical topics, you cannot, at present, read one on soccer or skiing or

cricket or golf or any other organized sport. Your odds of *ever* reading one on football or basketball or Nascar are not good, since only about twenty-five per cent of the introductions are commissioned in the United States, and a certain British bias persists in the choice of subjects. When I spoke with the series editor, Nancy Toff, she had just completed an assignment—given to her by her U.K. colleagues but reminiscent of grade school—to "write one paragraph about why baseball is important."

With luck, then, a Very Short Introduction to America's national pastime might be in the offing. But other gaps in the series are more entrenched, and more insidious. You can read about Alexander the Great but not about Catherine the Great, Kafka but not Virginia Woolf, Clausewitz but not Sojourner Truth, Schopenhauer but not Simone de Beauvoir, Michael Faraday but not Marie Curie. In fact, of the fifty-four individuals featured in the series all but a handful are white and none are women. The editors say that this is because the biographical introductions were grandfathered in from the Past Masters series, and that they rarely commission books on individual people anymore. But that is a choice, not a law, and, whatever the logic behind it, it leads the series to implicitly endorse the same position as millennia worth of other omnibus projects: that the experiences and the contributions of women and people of color barely belong even in the vast inventory of everything worth knowing.

Why *is* baseball important? For that matter, why is Russian Literature important? Why is the Silk Road important? Why—intellectually speaking, not as a practical matter—are Teeth important? Put differently, what do we gain or hope to gain by reading books about all this stuff?

The larger any compilation of knowledge gets, the more it forces us

to confront the question of what, exactly, so much knowledge is *for*. Is it meant to glorify God? Perhaps, yet it creeps equally close to blasphemy; omniscience, after all, is the purview of the divine. Is it to impress an emperor, or a boss, or a date? Maybe, but there's a fine line between being full of information and being full of oneself. Does it make us happy and virtuous, as Diderot hoped? Not on the evidence of Diderot himself, who suffered poverty and a prison sentence, was deserted by countless friends, and cheated rampantly on his wife. Does it make us wise? Not always. You can know everything there is to know about volcanoes and still die in one.

The classic defense of knowledge, as a hundred thousand inspirational posters will tell you, is that it is power. But, as a hundred thousand cultural theorists will counter, the relationship between those two terms is complicated: power is, among other things, the power to determine what counts as knowledge. Since roughly the middle of the last century, that kind of clout, which used to rest with the church and the state, has devolved to a considerable degree onto the academy. Accordingly, modern omnibus projects tend to reflect the ideas and ideals of the university (and often, as with the Very Short Introductions, to be a direct product of them).

Those ideals are not just the oft-repeated one of learning for learning's sake. "A society whose members lack a body of common experience and common knowledge is a society without a fundamental culture," warned a 1946 report by President Truman's Commission on Higher Education for American Democracy, an entity whose name said it all. The point of collecting, organizing, and disseminating a shared body of information—what E. D. Hirsh so controversially termed "cultural literacy" decades later—was to protect a certain vision of American society: at the time, from

Communism, but, more broadly, from all alien cultures and antagonistic ideas. Mere protection often turned into active promotion, in the form of various initiatives intended to spread Western values. From that perspective, projects like the Very Short Introductions seem like a kind of epistemological imperialism: an effort to dictate to the entire world what among its wild array of contents is worthy of our study.

That criticism, while merited, has its limits. The academy is not like the Catholic Church or an autocratic state, which has precious little room for contested ideas. It is, instead, a relatively open and cosmopolitan intellectual arena, one far more likely to help us understand and embrace new ideas than to obliterate them. What's more interesting, though, is that this criticism of omnibus projects shares with the projects themselves a fundamentally optimistic vision of knowledge: that it can bind people together, affect their behavior, and alter their world view.

This is an ancient notion. Ever since Aristotle, people have argued over whether accurate information produces appropriate action—that is, whether knowing the right thing reliably makes us do the right thing. It's profoundly tempting to believe that it does, but, if you attend to the actual workings of the world, it's also profoundly difficult. Indeed, we live in an era of abundant evidence to the contrary. An Islamophobe won't necessarily change his mind after reading a very short introduction to Islam, or, for that matter, a very long one; nor will an introduction to Global Warming necessarily reform a climate-change denier. Indeed, study after study shows that encountering information that contradicts people's preëxisting beliefs often just makes them double down. In our own fact-indifferent moment, it can often seem that knowledge, like poetry per Auden, makes nothing happen.

Yet it's impossible to shake the notion that knowledge is extraordinarily important—impossible, and terribly unwise. "To describe an attitude as knowledge is to rank it above many other attitudes," Jennifer Nagel writes in "Knowledge," the most meta title of all the Very Short Introductions. Implicitly, we all understand that knowledge is sturdier, more important, and more virtuous than beliefs or opinions or suspicions. Whatever else knowledge may be—and, as Nagel is at pains to point out, it is fiendishly difficult to define—it is not subservient or convenient; it has a good-faith relationship to reality. There's a reason repressive regimes are notorious for spreading false information. What we think we know can change how we behave—not quickly, not consistently, but often enough to matter.

Knowledge is, in that sense, unknowable; it's impossible to predict what it will or won't do once released into the world. That's reason enough to side with it: for the possibility, however slim, that it will *work*. But even a fact that fails to affect anything or anyone is no less factual, no less interesting, no less important. "It does not have to look good or sound good or even do good," Tom Stoppard wrote, in "The Invention of Love." "It is good just by being knowledge. And the only thing that makes it knowledge is that it is true. You can't have too much of it and there is no little too little to be worth having."

That sentiment could be the motto of the Very Short Introductions. They appeal to us because the world is vast and strange, because everywhere we look, from the firefly flashing in the darkness to Auden's elegy for Yeats, there is something to provoke our curiosity, some sliver of existence that we want to understand. Not everyone longs to be a polymath, but everyone who does is a philomath—someone who loves knowledge qua knowledge, who finds it moving, joyful, comforting, fun, startling, awe-inspiring. Whatever else might

motivate a project like the Oxford University Press series, that kind of pleasure is an essential part of it; at their best, omnibus works flow forth from an omnibus love of life. In the end, all we get of that is a very short introduction, too. Why not spend it learning everything we can? ♦